

Connect. Risk. Ask. Share. Lead!

Step into leadership
because you have a lot
to offer and a lot to learn.

By Daina S. Lieberman

**If you don't
advocate
for yourself
and your
colleagues,
who will?**

#1. Do what you know.

As teachers, we all have our own areas of expertise. What do you know better than other teachers in your department or on your collaborative team? When other teachers come to you for help, in what areas do they seek your advice? Often we underestimate ourselves, while others recognize our strengths and pursue our professional opinions. I enjoy presenting workshops on topics with which I am comfortable. It is also nice to have the opportunity to tweak and perfect a presentation.

#2. Do what you don't know.

Continue to pursue your own interests through professional development. Conducting research and taking coursework in areas that are intriguing to you make you a more well-rounded teacher and help you create new areas of expertise to share with others. My district requires an advanced academic endorsement. In taking one of those courses, I learned new research on working with advanced academic students that contrasted with what I learned in my teacher preparation program years before. This helped me develop a strong interest in twice-exceptional students and their unique needs, which led me to take more courses on differentiation. This curiosity helped me become a better teacher for all of my students and a resource for other teachers in my building.

#3. Take a risk.

When the International Baccalaureate middle years program coordinator position opened at my school, I debated whether to apply. It was a half-time position, so I would still be able to teach a few classes as well. I had taught a subject area within the program for a number of years but was concerned that I was not expert enough to run the program across all content areas. After seeking advice from trusted colleagues, I decided to go for it. I got the job, and I am truly enjoying this new challenge. As teachers, we often forget what it is like to do something totally new and different. I work with parents, teachers, and students in a new way, and I'm able to see my school community from a different perspective. I appreciate the ability to collaborate with and provide professional development to teachers in all content areas. I have learned countless important items about my school since September, and I have built wonderful relationships with colleagues I had never met before.

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I still remember the moment I stepped into the role of teacher leader. Having taught in a suburban high school for three years, I had applied and been accepted to Teaching Shakespeare Institute 2006, a summer institute at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

At the Folger, I (gently) read 500-year-old books, wrote papers, designed lesson plans, discovered primary sources, and acted in the Elizabethan Theatre with 24 other English teachers from across the U.S. Propping the crumbling texts on foam pads and using leaded string to hold down the pages was an English teacher's dream. We caressed First Folios and a copy of *Demonologie* with margin notes by King James. Pushing fear aside, we memorized lines and performed scenes from Shakespeare. It was both terrifying and exhilarating. And one day, one of our master teachers began talking about becoming a Folger Shakespeare Set Free Workshop Facilitator. *I could do that*, I thought.

Thus was born a teacher leader.

I began running professional development courses on how to teach Shakespeare and using performance across the curriculum; I advanced to book studies on Cris Tovani's *I Read it but I Don't Get It* and literature circles on young adult novels and hands-on sessions with technology in the English classroom. I shared ideas with colleagues, and we presented together at a statewide writing conference on a method of using Power Point™ to visually create a close reading of text. My love of teaching and sharing successful ideas meant I quickly took to presenting professional development and began to look for more avenues to develop my expertise and satisfy my curiosity. But it took that master teacher at the Folger to make me believe I could be a leader in my profession. Many teachers need a similar push to get started on the path to teacher leadership beyond their classroom walls. Here are 10 tips for teachers on how to get started and where to look to expand their effect on students, schools, and the profession.



#4. Make connections.

I always wanted to supervise a student teacher to give back to my profession. I finally got the chance after moving to Virginia. The professor in charge of my intern became a good friend who provided valuable advice when I decided to go back to school this year to pursue a doctorate. Later, I was able to assist with a planning grant to open a laboratory school in our county when she became the grant manager. I participated in site visits in two states to glean ideas from successful lab schools that we could use in our school. This experience opened another area of interest to me and provided me the chance to see some fascinating trends in education firsthand.

#5. Get out of the classroom.

Certainly, the very definition of teacher leader implies that you are still a teacher. However, there are lots of amazing things going on in education that are not all happening in your classroom or your school building. Teacher leaders have the unique position of being able to seek out innovation and bring it back to students. In addition, there may be local, state, or federal policies that you don't like. If you don't advocate for yourself and your colleagues, who will? Check out the U.S. Department of Education web site (www.ed.gov/), the Center for Teacher Leadership (www.cctl.vcu.edu/), and advocacy groups in your union or other professional organizations. I spent a weekend advocating for educators through a conference in Washington, D.C., with one of my professional organizations. We learned how to speak to our representatives, how to package and present our desires, and how to follow up on our own at a later date. It was exciting and something I would never have done on my own. I now follow education policy and politics far more closely than I did previously. I want to know how I will be affected and how I can effect change.

#6. Apply if you want to be recognized.

If you think you're doing something creative, tell someone about it. If you don't speak up, no one will know — and no one will benefit from your experiences. To find the programs, scholarships, and opportunities that will benefit you, start by exploring the resources available through your professional organizations and go from there. I've uncovered a wealth of opportunities since I joined PDK International, including being selected as an Emerging Leader for the 2012-13 school year. This honor has opened many doors and created fascinating avenues into other areas of education for me, including roundtable discussions at the Department of Education and participation in the PDK/Gallup Poll Advisory Panel. Teachers are used to being modest, but we need to brag a little!

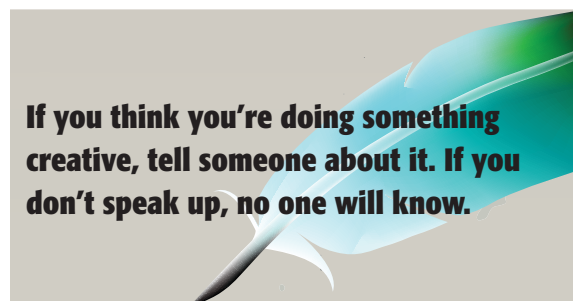
#7. Join professional organizations.

I have enjoyed attending conferences for various professional organizations to which I belong. Sometimes my administration or PTSA can contribute to registration expenses because I commit to providing turnaround teaching when I come home. I have heard numerous young adult authors speak, gotten a childhood favorite book signed by the author, and listened to Maya Angelou tell teachers that we are rainbows in someone's clouds. Sometimes the expense is too great and I have to pass, but colleagues are often willing to share gas money and a hotel room for the professional development that comes with these conferences. Moving beyond your content-area organization can be a liberating experience; you find yourself hobnobbing with superintendents and principals and professors and realize that you have important things to contribute

to the larger conversation about education. Know that many policy makers and high-level education professionals do want to listen. If we don't tell them what it's like in the trenches, they can't know.

#8. Give social media a try.

Developing a professional learning network (PLN) on Twitter has been eye-opening for me. I find more educational articles and tips on Twitter than I do through any other venue. Following other educators and policy makers keeps me up to date on the newest trends in education and what's going on with education policy. I can seek and receive advice from a wide range of professionals almost instantly through Facebook and Twitter. If writing more than 140 characters is more your thing, start a blog. Your opinion matters, and blogging is one way to get your opinion (and your name) out there.



#9. Ask.

If you ask the right person for what you, your students, or your staff needs, you will see changes. You can start small and local. When our district didn't support podcasting, I wanted to know why. Shortly after asking, my students were allowed to create and post podcasts. Advocating for yourself is a leadership skill that we teach students but forget to practice ourselves. Sometimes the squeaky wheel does get the grease.

#10. Help others become teacher leaders.

When you see an opportunity that isn't right for you or requires too much time, send it along to others. When you're respected as a leader already, you can help others see their potential by tapping them to step up. Push a great teacher to supervise a student teacher. When your committee has an opening, ask someone to join. Tell another teacher that he or she has valuable insights to contribute. You never know how it might change someone's career — just like the master teacher at Folger helped change mine.

Teacher leadership has many advantages for teachers and administrators. Since principals can't possibly meet all the demands of running a school building on their own, teacher leaders are a valuable resource to reach for when help is needed. If you aren't yet a teacher leader, look around you. What do you want to change? What would you like to see more of? If you're already an administrator or a teacher leader, look for teachers with the potential to help your school with their unique skill sets and invite them to become leaders. Teacher leaders can improve school culture and student achievement if they are invited to do so.

